

Heroes of the Highway

By Matt Hiebert



CATHY MORRISON



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MIKE WRIGHT

An elderly couple has a blowout on an interstate near Kansas City. Traffic thunders by at 70-plus mph, and there's only a few feet of clearance on the shoulder. The woman reminds her husband that he took the jack out of the trunk last month to make room for the grandkids' Christmas presents. The first tingles of panic arise.



About that time a white pickup truck pulls up behind them with strobe lights on the roof. A woman in a red jumpsuit steps from the cab and approaches the driver's window. She is with the Missouri Department of Transportation's Motorist Assist patrol. She jacks up the car, changes the tire and the couple is back on the road in minutes.

Although the example is fictitious, MoDOT's Motorist Assist unit deals with situations similar to that several times a day. Highway users in both Kansas City and St. Louis have come to expect the presence of these helpful individuals, who are entering their 10th year of service.

"You've got to like helping people to do this job," says Julie Love, Motorist Assist operator in MoDOT's Kansas City district. "You've got to be personable, knowledgeable and have a good sense of humor."

According to Randall Freeman, senior Motorist Assist supervisor for Kansas City, Missouri's original program was based on a similar one in a neighboring state.

"Illinois started their original program in Chicago," he says. "That was back in 1964, and they're still going strong. We learned that once the public sees the benefits of the program, they begin to expect this service."

Freeman says the objective of both programs is the same: Clear lanes of stranded motorists and keep traffic moving on major roads, bridges, highways and interstates.

Missouri's program started in St. Louis in early 1993. The original crew consisted of eight operators with five trucks. Coverage was only during morning and evening over a modest 61 miles of interstate. It quickly became apparent that the program was successful. By the end of the first year, the St. Louis team alone had logged 292,000 miles and had helped more than 9,000 motorists. The Kansas City program fired up the same year with a handful of operators and trucks. By the end of the year, they had helped thousands of sidelined drivers.

The program has grown to 31 members in St. Louis and 21 in Kansas City. Between both locations, operators make around 40,000 stops and patrol nearly 2 million miles a year. In Kansas City, Motorist Assist patrols highways from 5:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday. In St. Louis, the operation is on the road 24-hours a day all week.

But the real benefit of Motorist Assist is to all the people they *don't* stop to help. Any time a vehicle is stranded, even on the shoulder, a toll is taken on traffic flow. In fact, information gathered from industry studies on transportation show that:

- 60 percent of all traffic congestion is caused by incidents.
- During peak hours, one minute of lane blockage equals 20 minutes of traffic congestion.
- A vehicle parked on the shoulder reduces capacity of the closest lane by 20 percent.



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With those figures in mind, it's easy to see how the program helps many more drivers than just the ones stranded on the side of the highway. Clearing these stranded motorists increases traffic flow for thousands of other motorists. This translates into a safer driving experience and a cleaner air environment for the metropolitan area.

Tools of the Trade

For the most part, Motorist Assist operators help people with routine car troubles like flat tires, ruptured hoses and empty gas tanks.

Their customized pickup trucks come with arrow indicators to direct traffic and a strobe light to warn approaching motorists of their presence. Each pickup truck is stocked with wrenches, sockets, jacks, cones, compressors, gasoline, flares and other necessary items. According to Love, who has been with Motorist Assist for eight years, there have been many improvements to the vehicles since the early days.

"We finally got air conditioning a few years back so we could hear our radios," she says. "We used to have to roll up our windows in the middle of August just to hear them."

However, of all the equipment changes over the past 10 years, Motorist Assist Operator

Percy Houston says that upgrades in communications have been the most useful.

"The best thing we ever got is right here," he says, tapping the police radio under the dashboard of his truck. "A lot of times we're the first ones on the scene of an accident. It lets us tell the police what we've run into."

Motorist Assist's relationship with the police department is vital. The Emergency Response arm of the unit is especially intertwined with law enforcement. This group works the weekend and evening shifts and covers a wider patrol area. They are also trained to reset traffic signals and operate bucket trucks.

"Law enforcement has a hotline that they call whenever there is an emergency hazard," explains Freeman. "It could be a dead deer in the road, a hole in a bridge or a traffic signal that's out. Basically our five-man emergency response unit covers different situations over a wider geographical area."

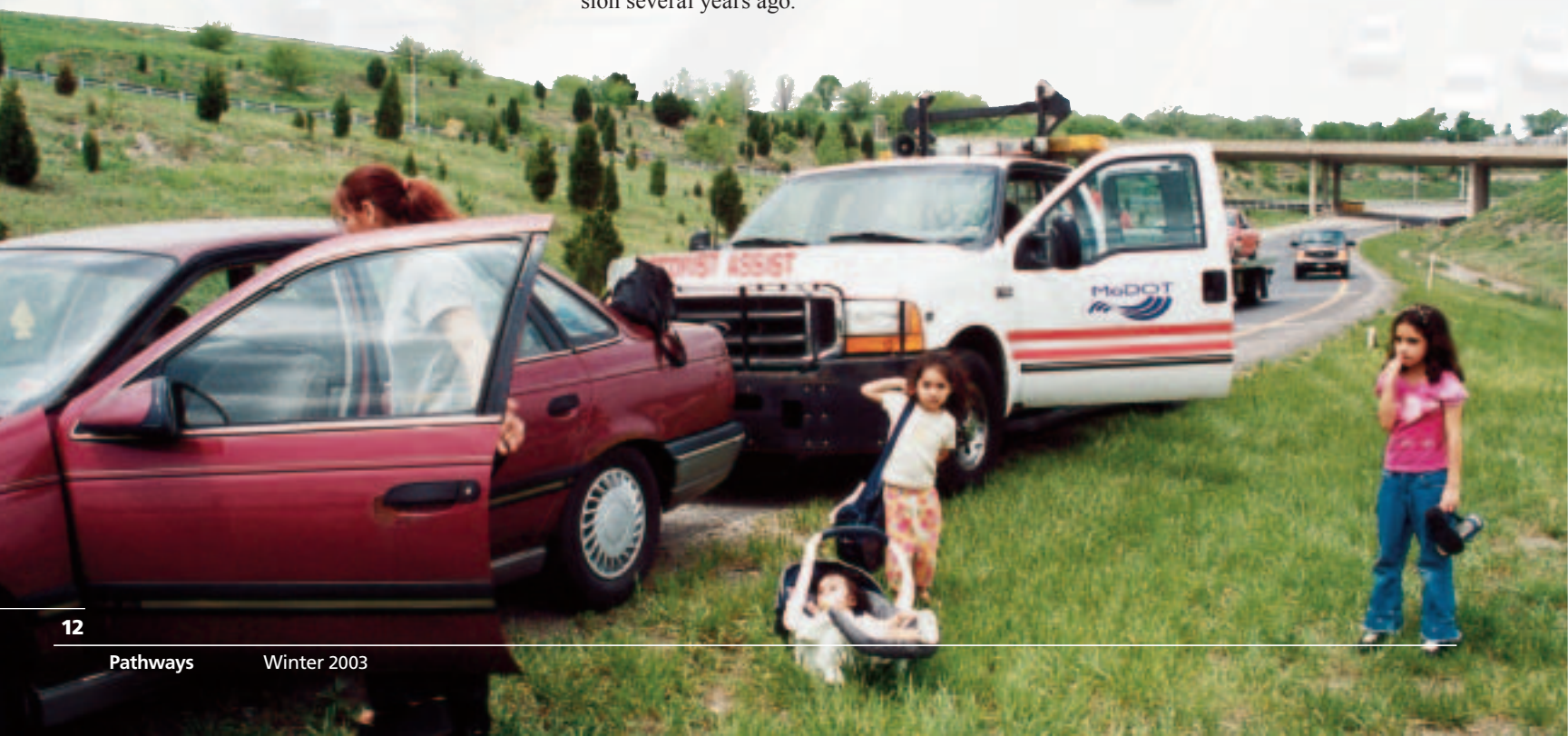
I Hope That's a Monkey

Although most of the stops are routine, every operator has had an assist that was out of the ordinary. Sometimes, way out of the ordinary.

Percy Houston remembers one such occasion several years ago.



"I was assisting these guys in a van," he says. "The whole time I was helping them, I kept hearing someone hollering inside. It sounded like a lady yelling. I didn't know who these guys were, and it was getting kind of scary. Then one of them opened up the door and they've got this angry monkey jumping around in a cage, yelling like crazy."



If you think that's the only monkey story they have to share, you'd be wrong. Freeman has one of his own.

"There was this woman pulled over to the side of I-70 and I stopped behind her to see if she needed help," he says. "I could only see her from behind, but I could tell she was holding something. When I came up on her, she turned around and I see that she's bottle-feeding this monkey at the side of the highway!"

Needless to say, the woman did not require Freeman's help.

The Next Mile Marker

The future of the Motorist Assist program looks as shiny as their Ford F-250s. Not only have improvements in vehicles and communications broadened the unit's abilities, new strides in traffic management have made these highway heroes more important than ever.

In St. Louis, Motorist Assist has already proven itself as the human facet of Gateway Guide, the intelligent transportation program for the metro area. The program utilizes state-of-the-art communication, traffic camera and sensor technology to react to incidents on the roadway and provide information back to the traveling public. A centralized transportation center monitors the ebb and flow of vehicles on the interstate highway and bridges.

"Currently, we have operators at the Transportation Information Center who monitor the traffic on the interstate highways," explains Bruce Pettus, incident management coordinator for the St. Louis district. "If the traffic management system detects a problem within the Motorist Assist patrol areas, we can be dispatched to clear that incident."

Many times, this means depending on the eyes and ears of the operators themselves. Pettus says that sending a human out to see what's up is still the best way to find out what's happening on the highway.

"You still need somebody out there feeding information back to the center and clearing the problem from the highway. Our role is as first responders. We're the people in the field."



Improved technology has also led to greater expectations from the public. Although his staff has not grown, Pettus is now managing a 24/7 operation. Without fanfare, St. Louis' Motorist Assist started patrolling

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Julie Love, Motorist Assist operator

weekends last August to refine the operation before announcing the extended hours to the public. Motorist Assist Emergency Response crews continued to cover major incidents during the overnight hours to make it a true round-the-clock operation. Pettus said within three hours of the first weekend shift, police calls started coming in to help stranded motorists.

Kansas City will launch its Scout program within the year. Although similar to the St. Louis system, the ITS in Kansas City will cover 75 continuous miles rather than various strategic locations.

More technological advances will further refine Motorist Assist's ability to help Missouri drivers, Pettus says.

"We're integrating Automatic Vehicle Locators on our trucks which will give real time locations through a Global Positioning System," he says. "We'll know exactly where our vehicles are at any given time."

Both Freeman and Pettus say that improvements in Motorist Assist uniforms, equipment and training are on the horizon. In the end, however, there is one thing that won't change among the ranks of Motorist Assist operators.

That's the type of person who wants to do the job.

Motorist Assist Operator Hector Gonzales summed it up best. As he drove through the tangle of exits and interchanges near downtown Kansas City looking for troubled motorists, he offered the common motivation shared among operators.

"Each day when I go home, I know I've helped someone," he explains. "It's a good feeling." ■

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